

SAVING TELEGRAM

FROM PARIS

CONFIDENTIAL

TO FCO TELNO SAVING 15 OF 23 MARCH 1988

SAVING TO (FOR INFO) EC POSTS, WASHINGTON, MOSCOW, UKDel NATO, HMCs IN FRANCE

MY SAVING TELEGRAM N° 14 OF 22 MARCH :

THE FRENCH PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS : THE RIGHT

SUMMARY

1. The polls make depressing reading for the Right. Chirac is trying to undermine Mitterrand and boost his own popularity by painting the President and the Socialists in lurid ideological colours; by posing as a rassembleur; and by wooing Le Pen's electorate. No sign so far that this will attract enough votes for a second round victory. Barre's chances in the second round might be marginally better than Chirac's, but the latest polls suggest that he is unlikely to progress beyond the first round. A Barre victory would lead to immediate parliamentary elections. In contrast, Chirac has said he will not dissolve the Assembly if he wins, although the temptation to do so will be strong. The political arithmetic means that Mitterrand starts his formal campaign favourite for re-election. If the Right are to stop him they must look to their own precarious unity; but they will also have to persuade some of those now committed to Mitterrand to move from Left to Right.

DETAIL

2. The current levels of popular support indicated by the opinion polls make depressing reading for the Barre and Chirac camps on several counts. They show that Mitterrand's level of support has remained high and relatively stable; that Le Pen's appeal remains constant at about 10%; and that, irrespective of whether Chirac is ahead of Barre or vice versa, the combined total of their first round vote (between 40-44%) is well short of the 50.1% needed for victory in the second round. Only the relatively large proportion of voters said to be uncommitted (around 40% in current polling) gives them grounds for hope.

3. The main preoccupation of Chirac and Barre in the last two months has been with the first round of the elections, when one will eliminate the other. It is only recently, with the potentially decisive 4-5 point gap that Chirac has opened over his rival, that his supporters have begun addressing the problem of how to put together sufficient votes to defeat Mitterrand in the second round and capture the presidency.

4. The Chirac team have adopted a three pronged strategy:-

- (i) they have tried to polarise the election along Left/Right lines, reminding the voters of the full-blooded Socialism of the 1981-83 period and asserting that neither Mitterrand nor the Socialist Party (PS) has

/changed.

CONFIDENTIAL

changed. Their aim is to frighten supporters away from Mitterrand into the Chirac camp;

- (ii) they have insisted that Chirac is the natural leader and rassembleur of the Right, as his role as Prime Minister since 1986 demonstrates. They also claim that there are no policy differences between Chirac and Barre (which the increasingly irate Barristes attribute to the fact that as soon as Barre advances a proposition, Chirac hijacks it and presents it as his own). The Chirac camp's aim is to make Barre seem an irrelevant distraction to the battle with a Left painted in lurid ideological colours, so sapping his support in the first round and ensuring that his voters move en bloc behind Chirac in the second;
- (iii) they have been trying to attract Le Pen supporters into the Chirac fold. Chirac, Pasqua and others have been making some tough noises about immigration and race relations, while warning that a vote for Le Pen is wasted and risks helping Mitterrand back into the Elysée.

5. At present none of these lines of attack shows signs of shifting voters in decisive numbers towards Chirac. The popular view is that both Mitterrand and the PS have moved sharply away from the ideological socialism of the early years of the septennat, and there has so far been correspondingly little inclination to accept RPR scare stories. As for Chirac as the Right's natural rassembleur, this may have siphoned off some of Barre's less committed supporters, but it has also greatly irritated a significant number of Barre's convinced loyalists, and may make them more inclined to abstain, or even vote for Mitterrand, rather than rally to Chirac in the second round (they find the rassembleur image difficult to swallow against the background of Chirac's abandoning of Chaban in 1974 and Giscard in 1981). Le Pen's supporters too have shown themselves largely immune to RPR arguments. They remain doubtful about Chirac's attitude to immigration, despite his recent tough talk, and about his approach to law and order. While they admire Pasqua, they recall that Chirac is opposed to the death penalty. It also takes more than a few fine phrases to overcome their long-standing distrust of the Gaullists, which goes back to de Gaulle's «betrayal» of Algeria.

6. For Chirac therefore, who will have to double the 24-26% he may win in the first round, the electoral arithmetic looks highly problematic. If he secures 75% of Barre's first round support, this may be worth 14-15% to him in the second round. If he attracts 50-60% of Le Pen's first round vote this will give him another 5-6%. But the combined total only amounts to about 46-47%, which would allow Mitterrand a convincing victory. Only if Chirac can secure the near total support of Barre's and Le Pen's first round electors can he be confident of winning, something that would require a substantial shift in opinion in the weeks ahead.

7. If Barre can get there, the second round looks marginally easier for him than it does for Chirac. (At present however the polls suggest that he will be eliminated in the first round.)

/Assuming

Assuming that he emerged as the Right's champion with 24-26%, Barre would follow the mirror image of the Chirac strategy outlined above, beginning with an appeal to those who had supported Chirac and Le Pen in the first round. Chirac's supporters seem readier to switch to Barre than Barre's to Chirac, and Barre provokes less animosity among Front National supporters than Chirac, not least because he is not identified so closely by them with Gaullism. He might therefore collect 90% of Chirac's vote, worth perhaps 15-16% in the second round, and 60-70% of Le Pen's vote worth perhaps another 6-7%. Unlike Chirac, however, Barre might also take votes directly from Mitterrand if, between the two rounds, he could persuade some who opted hesitantly for a Centre-Left Mitterrand in the first to switch to a Centre-Right Barre in the second. If he managed a 2-3% switch of this kind, he might just reach the Elysée.

8. Barre and Chirac differ about what they would do in the event of victory. Barre says he would dissolve the Assembly and ask the country for a UDF-RPR majority with which he could govern for five years. The electorate would probably, but not certainly, give it to him. His administration would be composed of figures from the present Right-wing majority, but he would probably offer jobs to some outside politics, and perhaps to Right-wing Socialists (though whether any of the latter would accept is a moot point). Front runners for Matignon under Barre are currently François-Poncet and Méhaignerie.

9. If Chirac won he has said that he would not dissolve the Assembly, but would allow it to run its full term until 1991. He might keep his word, but the pressures on him to dissolve would be intense. The RPR would want to cash in on its victory to increase its parliamentary representation, for which the ground was carefully prepared with the reintroduction in late 1986 of majority voting over two rounds. (With proportional representation abolished, many of the Front National's thirty-two seats would be likely to go to the RPR.) Chirac might decide to compromise, avoiding an early dissolution but finding a pretext within six months to a year for holding new elections (which is what many, including some in his own party, expect). There are a number of possibles for Matignon in the event of a Chirac victory: Balladur, Pasqua and Jerome Monod (a former Secretary-General of the RPR) are among them. The job might also go to someone in the UDF if Chirac felt the need to cement the Majority after a bruising election battle.

CONCLUSION

10. The UDF and RPR have been insisting throughout this campaign that there is now a Right-wing majority in France, and that either Barre or Chirac should therefore emerge victorious. But their claim is faulty on two counts: the first is the assumption that Le Pen's supporters identify with the Right. A majority probably do, but a significant minority do not. Le Pen's electorate should more properly be consigned to a special unpredictable and extremist category, rather than seen as the natural second round supporters of Barre or Chirac. The second error is to suppose that Barre's and Chirac's sympathisers can be added together to give a clear indication of the level of Right-wing support. The antagonisms and rivalries that bedevil relations within and between the

/UDF

UDF and RPR make this far too simple. A proportion of Barristes is so hostile to Chirac that they would rather Mitterrand won again than that Chirac should capture the Elysée: a minority of Chiraquiens feel the same way about Barre. This is a considerable handicap to the Right, and one which may become more severe if bitterness between the Barre and Chirac camps grows during the course of the campaign, as it has shown signs of doing.

11. The current electoral arithmetic thus makes Mitterrand favourite for re-election. He starts from a higher base of popularity, and has greater scope for attracting second round votes. If the Right are to stop him, Barristes and Chiraquiens certainly need to make common cause in the second round, and persuade as many Front National supporters as possible to join them. But this is unlikely to be enough: they will also have the difficult task of persuading a proportion of those now committed to Mitterrand to move from Left to Right. Only if they succeed is Chirac or Barre likely to win the presidential elections.


EERGUSSON

EUROPEAN POLITICAL 2-9

WED

CONFIDENTIAL

003542
MDLIAN 3926

CONFIDENTIAL

FM PARIS

TO PRIORITY FCO

TELNO 298

OF 211202Z MARCH 88

INFO SAVINGS EC POSTS, WASHINGTON, MOSCOW, UKDEL NATO

INFO SAVINGS CONSULS GENERAL IN FRANCE

MY SAVINGRAM 12 OF 16 MARCH: THE FRENCH PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

SUMMARY

1. BALLADUR HAS SUGGESTED THAT THE UDF AND THE RPR SHOULD MERGE. THERE IS POLITICAL LOGIC BEHIND THIS PROPOSAL BUT ITS TIMING IS DESIGNED TO ADD TO BARRE'S DIFFICULTIES AND TO DESTABILISE THE UDF. CLEVER FOOTWORK BY THE RPR BUT, IN BEREGOVY'S VIEW (WHICH IS WIDELY SHARED), IT IS A MANOEUVRE WHICH IMPLIES THAT THE RPR EXPECTS THE RIGHT TO LOSE THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS.

DETIAL

2. THE BATTLE FOR DOMINANCE ON THE RIGHT HAS TAKEN A NEW TURN. ON 17 MARCH BALLADUR PUBLISHED AN ARTICLE IN LE MONDE ADVOCATING THAT, AFTER THE ELECTIONS, THE UDF AND RPR SHOULD MERGE TO FORM A SINGLE, LARGE PARTY. CLAIMING THAT THERE WERE FEW POLICY DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE TWO GROUPINGS AND THAT THE DIVISION OF THE LIBERAL/CONSERVATIVE RIGHT INTO TWO BLOCKS WAS OF BENIFIT ONLY TO ITS OPPONENTS, HE SAID THE TIME HAD COME TO UNITE.

3. THE PROPOSAL HAS THE FORCE OF POLITICAL LOGIC. THE RIGHT'S INTERNAL DIVISION AND RIVALRIES FREQUENTLY MAKE FOR AN UNEDIFYING SPECTACLE WHICH ALIENATES THE VOTERS AND IS EXPLOITED BY THE SOCIALISTS (PS). THE FACT THAT ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE POLITICAL DIVIDE THERE IS NOW ONLY ONE MAJOR POLE OF ATTRACTION ADDS TO THE WEIGHT OF THE ARGUMENT. THE COLLAPSE OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY HAS MADE THE SOCIALISTS DOMINANT ON THE LEFT (AND THE LARGEST PARTY IN FRANCE) AND BALLADUR MAY WELL BE CORRECT IN SAYING THAT THE RIGHT SHOULD REGROUP IF IT IS TO COUNTER THE PS TO BEST EFFECT.

4. WHILE THE SUGGESTION MAKES APPARENT POLITICAL SENSE, THE TIMING IS FAR FROM INNOCENT. BALLADUR'S IMMEDIATE PURPOSE IS TO EXACERBATE BARRE'S CURRENT ELECTORAL DIFFICULTIES. BY SUGGESTING A MERGER HE HOPES TO REINFORCE THE RPR'S CLAIMS TO BE THE CHAMPIONS OF UNITY, AND CHIRAC'S CLAIMS TO BE THE RIGHT'S NATURAL LEADER. THIS IS INTENDED TO CONTRAST WITH A BARRE WHO IS DISDAINFUL OF HIS UDF SUPPORTERS, MANY OF WHOM SHOW SIGNS OF BEING DEMORALISED BY HIS

CONFIDENTIAL

003542
MDLIAN 3926

LACKLUSTRE CAMPAIGN AND ARE QUARRELING AMONGST THEMSELVES. IN THE LONGER TERM, THE BALLADUR PROPOSAL IS DESIGNED AS THE FIRST STAGE IN WHAT AMOUNTS TO AN ATTEMPTED RPR TAKEOVER OF THE UDF. IMPLICIT IN IT IS THE CALCULATION THAT BARRE WILL LOSE IN THE FIRST ROUND OF THE ELECTIONS AND THAT THE UDF'S COMPONENT PARTIES WILL THEN HAVE TO RE-THINK THEIR FUTURE. THE RPR IS OFFERING A READY-MADE SOLUTION TO THEIR DILEMMA, NO DOUBT CONFIDENT THAT IT WOULD EASILY DOMINATE ANY ENLARGED GROUPING.

5. THE INITIAL REACTION OF THE UDF LEADERS TO THE PROPOSAL HAS BEEN TO REJECT IT. THE CENTRIST (BARRISTE) CDS HAS BEEN PREDICTABLY HOSTILE, INSISTING THAT THEIR POLITICAL VALUES ARE DISTINCT AND CANNOT BE CATERED FOR IN A SINGLE, MASS PARTY. LEOTARD'S PARTI REPUBLICAIN (PR) HAS ALSO BEEN DISMISSIVE BUT MORE ON THE GROUNDS THAT THE SUGGESTION IS ILL-TIMED, COMING FIVE WEEKS BEFORE THE ELECTIONS, THAN THAT ITS POLITICAL LOGIC IS NECESSARILY FAULTY. BALLADUR WILL BE UNSURPRISED BY THESE REACTIONS: INDEED HE WILL HAVE ANTICIPATED THEM AND WILL HOPE TO EXPLOIT THEM. THE CDS ARE NOW UNDER PRESSURE TO BALANCE THEIR REJECTION OF A MERGER WITH A REAFFIRMATION OF THEIR COMMITMENT TO THEIR CURRENT RIGHT-WING PARTNERS, A REAFFIRMATION WHICH COULD MAKE IT HARDER FOR A RE-ELECTED MITTERRAND TO TEMPT THEM INTO A SOCIALIST/CENTRIST COALITION. IF, HOWEVER, THE CDS REFUSE TO GIVE SUCH A COMMITMENT, IT WILL INCREASE THE STRAINS BETWEEN THEM AND THE PR WHO MIGHT BE WILLING TO DISCUSS A REALIGNMENT ON THE RIGHT AFTER THE ELECTIONS (AND ARE RUMOURED TO HAVE HAD SECRET DISCUSSIONS WITH THE RPR ABOUT THIS). SUCH PRESSURES MIGHT PROVE UNCONTAINABLE, LEADING TO THE BREAK-UP OF THE UDF AND LEAVING THE RPR DOMINANT ON THE RIGHT.

6. BALLADUR'S PROPOSAL IS THUS A CLEVER POLITICAL MOVE. IT ALLOWS THE RPR TO POSE AS THE CHAMPIONS OF RIGHT WING UNITY AT THE EXPENSE OF BARRE AND A DIVIDED UDF. AND AS THE RPR KNOW, THE IDEA MAY COME TO HAVE INCREASED ATTRACTIONS TO THOSE IN THE UDF NOW DENOUNCING IT, IF BARRE IS DEFEATED IN THE ELECTIONS. BUT AS A NUMBER OF COMMENTATORS HAVE POINTED OUT, THE FACT THAT THE RPR HAVE MADE THIS PROPOSAL NOW SUGGESTS THAT THEY DO NOT EXPECT THE RIGHT TO WIN THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS. IT IS A MANOEUVRE DESIGNED TO PRESS HOME CHIRAC'S CURRENT ADVANTAGE OVER BARRE SO THAT HE AND THE RPR WILL BE THE DOMINANT FORCE ON THE RIGHT AFTER 8 MAY.

7. THIS WAS CERTAINLY THE VIEW OF BEREGOVY (FORMER SOCIALIST FINANCE MINISTER) WHEN HE DINED WITH ME ON 18 MARCH. HE ARGUED THAT IF CHIRAC WAS EXPECTING TO WIN, HE WOULD HAVE KEPT THIS PROPOSAL UNTIL AFTER THE ELECTIONS: IT WAS BECAUSE HE DID NOT THAT HE HAD

CONFIDENTIAL

003542
MDLIAN 3926

LAUNCHED BALLADUR. HIS AIM WAS TO INCREASE THE PRESSURE ON BARRE BEFORE THE ELECTIONS, BUT ALSO TO COUNTER A POSSIBLE THREAT FROM GISCARD AFTER THEM. THE LATTER, WHO WOULD LIKE TO RECLAIM THE LEADERSHIP OF THE RIGHT, HAS LONG ADVOCATED THE NEED FOR UNITY. CHIRAC HAS STOLEN HIS CLOTHES AND WILL BE BETTER ABLE TO RESIST A RESURGENT GISCARD IF HE LOSES ON 8 MAY, BLAMING HIS DEFEAT ON THAT LACK OF UNITY FOR WHICH BALLADUR IS NOW CALLING.

8. OTHER POINTS MADE BY BEREGOVY ARE REPORTED IN MIFT.

FERGUSSON

YYYY

DISTRIBUTION

272

MAIN

258

EUROPEAN POLITICAL

WED

ADDITIONAL

14

EC POSTS
WASHINGTON

MOSCOW
UKDEL NATO

NNNN